

Polygyny: A Denigration of Gender Equality in Africa

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Abstract

Polygyny is the marriage of one male with more than one female. It is very trite that women are considered as the gender of fragility and emotions. These conceptions are deeper in many parts of Africa. The female gender is viewed as one devoid of authority, dominance, and power. These views about women are from time immemorial. In some cultures and religions with ideological fundamentalism, women are not allowed to appear in public and to sit together publicly with men. In some places in Africa, men do not need the consent of their wives in order to marry new ones. In this regard, women become victims of capricious decisions of the man. Unfortunately, the idea of polyandry, the opposite of polygyny, is considered totally unworkable, and even unthinkable. The main objective of this paper is to analyse the concept of polygyny as a denigration of gender equality in Africa. The problem that warrants this research is that polygyny, in all its ramifications, tends to promote gender inequality owing to the fact that in many cultures, men are still allowed to have many wives. This fosters power imbalance in the relationships where women have limited power to make critical decisions even in matters that concern them. The analytical research method has been adopted. Finally, this paper submits that though the problem of polygyny is complex, approaches like societal legal reforms, women's empowerment and so on can go a long way in addressing the issue.

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Introduction

In the Preface to *Reflections upon Marriage*, the first English feminist, Mary Astell, asks her famous rhetorical question: “If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?”¹ These well-chosen words have earned her a place in the annals of history as a theorist of 'freedom from domination'. Even up to this contemporary period in the world history, gender inequality also made manifest through polygyny is still an existent fact. In many parts of the globe, equality in gender is still a dream to be realized. The truth remains that in some parts of the world, evident efforts are being made to exterminate, extirpate or completely root out inequality in gender. Regrettably, there is no commitment or steadfast fixity of purpose to this ideal in some parts of our modern world. Many gender philosophers from around the world are of the opinion that the denigration of the female gender is essentially linked to the traditional, cultural, social and emotional ties between masculinity and reason; then femininity or muliebrity and emotion. That is, male/reason versus female/emotion. Generally speaking, women are more emotional than men.

Historically, in many parts of Africa, power has been accorded to men to a greater extent than women. The masculine gender is normally regarded as the gender of power. This is the foundation of the reason, explanation or excuse for the belittlement or degradation that women go through; and this concept underlies their relegation to a lower or outer edge in the society. It also undergirds the concept of polygynous marriages in traditional African societies. So, at the level of the family in ideal traditional African societies, Ipadeola observes that girls are brought up to believe that their importance is basically determined by the male in their lives. Therefore, it is either that a girl is eminent because her father is eminent, or she finds eminence as a woman through her husband. In most cases, it is either a woman's father is in control of her life, or her husband. A woman that is not under the “covering” of a man is not an ideal woman. Whereas many African customs prohibit that a man should be subject to another person unless he is a slave.²

The Concept of Polygyny

Polygyny is the marriage or cohabitation of one man with more than one woman. It is necessary to make a distinction between polygamy and polygyny. While polygamy has to do with a person of any gender having multiple spouses; polygyny is a form of polygamy in which a man is married to several women at the same time. It is derived from Greek 'poly' which means many or several; and 'gune' which means woman. Also, it is not the same with

¹. Patricia Springborg, ed. *Astell: Political Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18.

². Abosede P. Ipadeola, *Feminist African Philosophy: Women and the Politics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2023), 73.

digamy, which is a second legal marriage that happens after the death or formal divorce of a spouse. There is also bigamy, which is the criminal offence of marrying any other person while having a legal spouse living.³

It is a common practice in many cultures and societies around the world, including the biblical King Solomon; although the degree and acceptance of polygyny varies in different places. It is recognised as the most common and acceptable form of polygamy around the world. In some cases, the women may be sisters or relatives, that is, sororal polygyny; while in other cases they may be unrelated, that is, non-sororal polygyny. Polygyny is often associated with patriarchal societies, where men hold dominant and influential positions of power more than the women. The analytical examinations of the condition of women in polygynous marriages under patriarchal societies reveal, according to Nkiru Nzegwu, that “the category 'woman' defines women as the negative image of men. The ideology of masculinity underlying this patriarchal vision cast women as not just physiologically different, but as opposites. Men are strong and taciturn, women are weak and emotional; men are masters, women are subordinates”.⁴

Briefly giving the gist of the above-mentioned analysis, Sheila Ruth avers: “they all say that women as human beings are substandard: less intelligent; less moral; less competent; less able physically, psychologically, and spiritually; small of body, mind and character”.⁵ Along this maleness or masculinity line of thought, Martha Nussbaum considers men as more characteristic or emblematic in public life when it is asserted strongly that women as a result of their emotional nature, lack the ability of complete deliberation and thoughtful rationality, therefore, should not carry out several social functions demanding rationality, consistency with logic and sound judgement. Even though John Locke's theory of liberalism is sympathetic towards women, the feminist prospect in Locke, however, receives a heavy blow in Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*. Pateman points out that “the contractual theory is patriarchal, because the agreement to form the State was made by men and presupposed the prior subjection of women”.⁶

³. *The New International Webster's Dictionary of English Language*, (Encyclopaedic Edition).

⁴. Nkiru Nzegwu, “Feminism and Africa: Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 562.

⁵. Sheila Ruth, “Images of Women in Patriarchy,” in *Issues in Feminism* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1990), 89.

⁶. Mark Goldie, “Mary Astell and John Locke,” in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender and Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (London: Ashgate, 2007), 65.

Polygyny and the Predominance of Men's Gender of Power in Africa

From time immemorial, many generations of men in Africa have practiced polygyny, that is, they were (are) married to two or more women at the same time. In many African cultures, this type of marriage is permissible inasmuch as the man cherishes that type of family. Across Africa, polygynous marriages are prevalent. Some scholars point out that polygyny was widespread among adherents of African Traditional Religion in West Africa until the advent of Christianity. Although Christianity emphasizes that marriage should be between a man and a woman, a good number of Christians in Africa are in polygynous marriages up till today. Also, the advent of Islam in the region encourages polygyny. The tenets of Islam encourage Muslim men who can, to marry up to four wives. As a result, the practice is still in existence in contemporary Africa.

There is no consensus or full agreement among scholars with regard to how the practice of polygyny began in Africa as scholars are of diverse opinions. Some scholars point out that polygyny in Africa emerged in connection to the slave trade. Along this line, Dalton and Leung argue:

The transatlantic slave trade in West Africa triggered a great imbalance in the men to women ratio of the people left in the continent. Male slaves were preferred as workers on farms and plantations in America. So eventually, there were much more women than men and each man had to marry more than one woman to take care of the excess number of women around. The necessity, in their view, erased the stigma hitherto associated with polygyny. They further explain that polygyny persists in Africa simply because it has over time become accepted as a part of African culture and as is popularly known, cultural change occurs slowly but solidly.⁷

In *Polygyny: The African Welfare System*, Curtis Rogers points out that polygyny started in Africa a long time ago as a welfare arrangement. He refers to his explications as “the correct historical perspective of polygyny and the reason for its development in ancient African societies, a view that has been historically distorted because of cultural biases and ignorance”.⁸ Rogers is of the view that polygyny in Africa was a conscious design and intended action of indigenous Africans and not the aftermath or consequence of the slave trade. That is to say, men married more women in order to balance the equation and take care of as many of the women as possible and reduce the number of women who would be left, against their wish, without husbands.

⁷. John Dalton and Tin Leung, “Why is Polygyny More Prevalent in West Africa?” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 62, No. 4 (2014): 599.

⁸. Curtis Rogers, *Polygyny: The Ancient African Welfare System* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2013), 7.

Another argument given to justify the practice of polygyny in traditional African societies is the economic control on the part of men. In many African societies, men are regarded as the primary providers or breadwinners of their respective families. So, having more women as wives has the possibility of rendering economic prosperity to the man. Of course, many men were farmers, and farming was the noblest profession in traditional African societies. Considering the fact that women, together with their children, have the potential of providing free labour in the farm made polygyny more enticing.

Therefore, polygynous marriages often involve men gathering as many wives as possible to increase their labour force and ability to generate wealth. In *Feminist African Philosophy: Women in the Politics of Difference*, Ipadeola equally observes that the more wives a man has, the more children the women bear and the more the number of people within the household available for farm work. Therefore, a large household does not only make more workers available, but it also provides more workers who would work gratis and, thereby, make more money for the head of the family.⁹ Therefore, this economic control on the part of the man in polygynous marriages further reinforces the man's position of power, as he holds the key to resource allocation and symbol prestige, strength and wealth within the family in traditional Africa.

Another argument to justify the practice of polygyny in the traditional African societies is the postpartum customary sexual abstinence on the part of the woman who has just given birth. Postpartum simply means “occurring immediately after birth”. The postpartum customary abstinence which demanded that women, who have just put to bed, should pay serious attention to their duty of breastfeeding the neonate or newborn baby is seen as argument for the introduction of polygyny. So, as one of the wives puts to bed and has a suckling to nurse, other wives would be readily available for the man to satisfy his sexual needs.¹⁰

Other views on the possible explication for polygyny among Africans are the concepts of inheritance and succession in Africa. In African traditional societies, inheritance of the father's wealth, lands and other assets most often pass down to his sons. This, to a greater extent, strengthens a cycle of male authority, influence, dominance and power and belittles that of women. On account of this, most African married women see themselves as strangers in their fathers' houses. In almost all African societies where the royal titles,

⁹. Ipadeola, *Feminist African Philosophy*, 75.

¹⁰. Ipadeola, *Feminist African Philosophy*, 75.

offices and powers/authority are inherited; they are handed down to the men. These royal men in turn marry many women to ensure that male children, who will be successors to the thrones and offices, are not lacking in the royal family. This male-centred inheritance system privileges male heirs and perpetuate the notion that men, not women, are the rightful controllers of property and wealth.

Another argument for polygyny is social status upliftment for men. In many African cultures, the number of wives a man has is often seen as a symbol of diligence, industry, wealth and promotion in social status in the society. This is because it is believed that no woman would agree to have a man as husband if she did not see that capacity in the man to take care of her. In Igbo Language, a wife is also regarded as *oriaku di ya*, which means “the one who enjoys the wealth of her husband”. This strengthens the notion that male superiority and dominance, as having many wives, signal the ability to control and acquire more women; while women themselves are often regarded as commodities or possessions.

Most regrettably, this social status upliftment for men in polygyny brings with it the limited agency for women. Polygynous marriages often restrict the agency and autonomy of women. The co-wives within a polygynous marriage tend to have lower status and fewer rights compared to the husband. This means that decisions regarding their own lives, childbirth, and family matters are often made by the husband, further cementing his power over the woman.

The Problems of Polygynous Marriages

Polygynous marriages, which have to do with a man marrying several women, can engender many challenges and problems. The arrival of a co-wife simply indicates a reduction on the household or family consumption level and per capita income. This implies that the man has to work harder all the more in order to have the wherewithal to keep his increasing family afloat. Again, the emotional concern manifested in form of jealousy, unhealthy competition, feelings of abandonment, neglect or inadequacy can rear their ugly heads among the wives. These emotional imbalances can lead to strained relationships, psychosomatic or psychoneurotic distress or disorders for the people involved. It is also very likely that the husband may face difficulties in meeting the emotional and physical needs of having several wives.

In addition, polygynous marriages come with concomitant problems of heavy financial burden on the part of the man. Making provisions for several wives and their respective families can lead to financial strain, which may impact on the general well-being of the

family unit. Also, inadequate attention and time are problems associated with polygyny. It is always very difficult for the man involved in polygynous marriage to give equal amount of time and attention to the wives and children. Even attempting to do that may be very challenging to the man. Not giving proper attention and time to individual spouse and her children can end up leading to feelings of abandonment, degradation, neglect or resentment among the wives and their children.

Moreover, marrying multiple wives can lead to disputes and squabbles with regard to inheritance rights and property claims. At the moment of divorce of any of the wives or the death of the husband, each wife and her children try to get even the lion share of the man's property. The wives can even struggle over the body of their late husband. There have been cases where, upon the man's death, each wife claims to be the first wife of the late husband so that the body would be buried in her own compound. This happens when the wives have their respective houses built for them by their husband in different locations in his own community.

Meanwhile, polygyny can engender health problems. Indulging in sexual relationship with many partners increases the risk and danger of acquiring sexually transmitted infections. Polygynous marriages in remote places with lack of information about safe-sex practices and very insufficient access to reproductive health care may pose greater health risks for all the people involved in the marriage or relationship. The fact that polygynous marriage itself can engender infidelity is worrisome and tending to cause anxiety; the possibility of acquiring sexually transmitted infections through the practice worsens the entire scenario.

The Psychological Effects of Polygyny on Women

The psychological effects of polygyny on the female gender include preponderance of excessive anxieties, depressions, hostilities, somatisations, psychiatric disorders, and unnecessary suspicious tendencies towards other people compared to women in monogamous marriages. Scholars are of the opinion that women in polygamous marriage, to which polygyny is a part, have lower self-esteem, higher degrees of emotional catastrophes, higher levels of marital dissatisfactions and family dysfunctionalities than those in monogamous relationships.

Again, women in polygynous marriages are very likely to experience loneliness even though married, unhappiness, fierce jealousy, zealous vigilance, feelings of grudging admiration, desire to have something that is possessed by another, retaliatory behaviours, malicious backbiting, spite and resentment at seeing the success of another, lack of

intimacy with their spouses, leading to infidelity. Elaborating on the dangers of polygyny, Ipadeola observes:

What makes polygyny an essential subject in feminist studies is that while polygyny is approved of in many African societies, polyandry is generally frowned at. Polyandry is regarded as an inconceivable taboo, an aberration in many African societies. In the context of polygyny in Africa, the woman's opinion is insignificant, especially if she is already married to the man. The man (the gender of power) has the prerogative of determining whether the marriage would be polygynous or monogamous. In many cases, if the woman (the first wife) opposes the decision of the man to marry another woman; not only the man's family but also members of her own family are likely to resist her decision, especially if the *man's religion* does not forbid polygyny.¹¹

Addressing the Problems of Polygynous Marriages in Africa

The solution to the problems of polygynous marriages in Africa is complex and has socio-cultural and legal implications. In fact, there is no straightforward solution that will match all the problems. Therefore, a prudent or nicety approach is needed that considers the cultural, educational, local, legal, social and the women's own perspectives and agency. However, here are some key steps and potential approaches to addressing the issue. An important step towards addressing the problems of polygynous marriages is the introduction of legal reforms and making them effective. African countries or regions that have predominant and prevailing polygynous marriages can introduce legal reforms that ascertain gender equality and protect the rights of women. These legal reforms will include, among other things, the implementation and enforcement of laws against child marriages, assuring rights to education and property ownership for women, and making abuse or discrimination against any woman within a polygynous marriage a punishable offence.

Another important step in this regard is encouraging education and popularizing awareness about women's rights and gender equality. These practices, when taken seriously, can go a long way to confront and challenge the age-long cultural norms that heighten polygyny. This is achievable through community outreach programmes, school curricula, awareness campaigns, and even house-to-house information to all, most especially to the families where polygyny is already being practiced. This is to make sure no one claims ignorance of the efforts being put in place for the need to live harmoniously and peacefully in every home, especially the polygynous families.

Another necessary approach to addressing the problems inherent in polygynous marriages is women empowerment. Women are naturally competitive; and they can do wonders when they are given the basic support to do the needful. Empowering women economically,

¹¹. Ipadeola, *Feminist African Philosophy*, 75-76.

financially, politically and socially can avail them of more opportunities, choices and options to decide their own fate. Providing women with access to job opportunities and vocational training can help them become more self-reliant, independent, innovative and capable of bringing up responsible children.

In addition, the involvement of the community and religious leaders can be of immeasurable and inestimable help. In African societies, the community and religious leaders are accorded with great honour and respect. So, advocating and popularizing rights-based interpretation of polygynous marriage by these highly respected leaders can have very positive and strong influence on the attitudes and norms of the community. Establishing support systems for women in polygynous marriages by the community through the efforts and positive instigations of these religious and community leaders can offer emotional and practical assistance.

Another important approach towards solving the problems inherent in polygynous marriages is the requirement of International supports and collaborations. Some African countries are ravaged by constant wars and inability to have peaceful transition of power from one administration to another. In such countries or societies, the aim of polygyny is just the reproduction of children without any credible means to raise them up. This notion of parents having as many children as possible is one of the major issues drawing the continent back. So, the governments, non-governmental organisations and International bodies can work together to share best practices, provide counselling, support services, funding for initiative and workshop programmes for women in polygynous marriages, especially those dealing with infidelity to enlighten and help them on how to navigate the challenges.

Sequel to the publication of *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*, Mary Astell published a second part adumbrating and sketching a method for “the improvement of their minds.” Astell wrote this second work in order to encourage women to make better their mindsets or mentalities through their own efforts. She specifically targets those women who are so inured to a life of ignorance and idleness that they are loath to commence any improvement. According to her: “they know not how to look into their souls, or if they do, they find so many disorders to be rectified, so many wants to be supplied, that frighten with the difficulty of the work, they lay aside the thoughts of undertaking it”¹². The second *Proposal* proffers a method that will make such

¹². Jacqueline Broad, “Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom,” in *Mary Astell: Reason, Gender and Faith*, eds. William Kolbrener and Michal Michelson (London: Ashgate, 2007), 167.

women capable of overcoming a purely sensuous and animal life, and to “procure such a temper of mind” as will make them happy in all conditions. The precise and clear objective of her work is not just to help the female folk in the attainment of truth, but to educate them on how to attain happiness by leading responsible and virtuous lives, devoid of unnecessary dependence on men.

According to Astell, one of the biggest challenges to acquiring true virtue on the part of women is the influence of *custom* on their moral judgments. Astell argues that “Ignorance and lack of proper education lay the foundation of vice; and imitation and custom rear it up”¹³. Custom is an accepted or habitual practice of long standing. Henry More defines custom as “a corporeal impression by which the soul is extremely bent to judge things as true, good, or amiable, for no other motive, but because it has been accustomed so to judge, and so to act”¹⁴. Astell's usage of the term “custom” is generally in accordance with that of More. For her, “custom inclines us to appraise an action as right or wrong for no other reason than that such an action has been deemed right or wrong by long use and by the sanction of our forebears”¹⁵. Therefore, Custom makes a powerful, but potentially unreasonable, influence on our appraisal about how we should or should not act. In the *Proposal II*, Astell maintains that most women are “so little improved” and even greatly incapacitated because of “ill-nurtured customs”.

One ground for this moral decadence is that custom changes to the contrary or turns upside down the proper relation that should exist between the “*understanding*” and the “*will*”. The understanding, that is, the intellect, is that faculty of “receiving and comparing concepts or ideas,” while the will is the capacity of making conscious choice, decision and intention. It is “the power of preferring any thought or motion, of directing them to this or that thing rather than to another”. It is the duty of the understanding to govern the will; unfortunately, the reverse is the case under the influence of custom, as the will becomes “head-strong and rebellious”¹⁶. Moral judgments are made when the will either admits or declines the intellect's idea of “what is fit.” Such judgments can go wrong when the intellect is chained or shackled by unclear, beclouded and perplexed ideas that custom puts in us, and the will is compelled or forced to accept them anyway¹⁷. For Astell, the major issue is to explicate how ignorant, uneducated women are to subdue and surmount those early influences on account of custom that set women's inclinations on the wrong path.

¹³. Broad, “Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom,” 168.

¹⁴. Henry More, *An Account of Virtue* (Bristol: Routledge, 1997), 87.

¹⁵. Goldie, “Mary Astell and John Locke,” 168.

¹⁶. Broad, “Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom,” 168.

¹⁷. Broad, “Astell, Cartesian Ethics, and the Critique of Custom,” 168.

According to Ipadeola, “polygyny is a marital arrangement that reinforces the power of the man over the woman. . . .Polygyny denies women agency and autonomy over issues of their own sexuality. For example, traditional customs and religions teach women that their sexualities and bodies do not belong to the women but their husbands”.¹⁸ With this in mind, many African societies hold and propagate the idea that: “once married, women's bodies belong to their husbands. Women are expected to respond to their husband's needs and wishes, often without regard to their own . . . husbands' bodies can be shared with other women . . . this belief undergirds practices not only of polygyny but of 'wife sharing,' wherein the giving of one's wife to a guest for sex constitutes a form of hospitality.”¹⁹

The fact remains that in any culture where polygyny is allowed and polyandry is frowned at, that particular culture empowers one gender and subjugates the other gender by limiting the choices available to them. This analysis does not advocate for any form of polygamy, but one of the objectives is to unwrap some African cultural practices that put the female gender in a very inferior and less favourable position; thereby, unduly encouraging inequality between the genders. No human being should be put in a very tight position because of his or her God-given gender.

Conclusion and Recommendation

We have seen some problems inherent in polygynous marriages and solutions have been proffered. As already pointed out, one of the major issues in polygynous marriages in Africa is that of property inheritance. This is even a problem in monogamous marriages, how much more the polygamous ones to which polygyny is a part. The problem can even rear its ugly head when the polygynist is still alive, and he sees his family torn apart under his watch. Given the importance attached to property inheritance in African societies, the chastity and fidelity of the woman are absolutely necessary. This is because if her fidelity is questionable, open to doubt or suspicion; so too is the integrity or moral soundness of the entire family. Jean-Jacques Rousseau calls a serious attention to the severity of this violation of a law, a duty, or a moral principle when he labelled it “treason”, according to him:

When the faithless wife gives her husband children who are not his own, she is false both to him (her husband) and to them (her children), her crime is not infidelity but treason. Can any position be more wretched than that of the unhappy father who ... is haunted by the suspicion that this is the child of another, a thief who is robbing his own children of

¹⁸. Ipadeola, *Feminist African Philosophy*, 76.

¹⁹. Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), 52.

their inheritance. Under such circumstances, the family is little more than secret enemies armed against each other by a guilty woman.²⁰

Analysing the above-mentioned thought-provoking arguments of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and how polygyny can easily engender infidelity, James Boswell writes to Samuel Johnson, pointing out that the severity of the transgression of infidelity is equally very serious. He says: “consider, Johnson, of what importance to society the chastity of women is, upon that, all the prosperity in the world depends. We hang a thief for stealing a sheep; but the unchastity of a woman transfers sheep, and farm and all, from the right owner”.²¹

Finally, the need for both men and women to live good lives is necessary in order to have responsible families and societies in general. When this happens, there will be mutual respect for every gender, and the issue of denigration of any gender will be a thing of the past. Also, all societal cultures, customs and traditions should be refined. The ones that are not impacting positively on the lives of the people should be totally abandoned. Gender equality is very realizable in Africa, when there are no longer unreasonable and inhuman customs and traditions tying innocent people down. This is the reason why, in *Freedom for Women*, Mary Astell challenges negative assessments of women's capabilities, Locke's separation of the public and the private spheres and the denial to women of the rights that men enjoy in public life. She pushes for increased education for women in order to make them more fit to raise enlightened children. She blames women's inequality with men not on any deficiencies in women, but rather on customs and laws that have kept women from education and the development of their abilities.

In sum, she remonstrates and calls attention to the fact that the human will is free, but custom erects “a tyranny over our free born souls” and makes it seem as though we are not at liberty to resist our unwholesome tendencies/inclinations. Simply put, this is real delusion and illusion. In actual sense, all human beings, including women, have the free capacity to govern and regulate their will according to their understanding. In line with Astell's pieces of advice, therefore, women are encouraged to avoid all forms of erroneous judgments, and carefully follow a reliable method of thinking in order to improve their lives in all circumstances.

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²¹. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. William H. Payne (New York: Appleton, 1918), 324-325.

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